

Heraldry as a Name System

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Abstract

Although the difference between the core of proper names and common nouns is intuitively obvious, defining properhood is one of the hard questions in onomastics. This is true to the extent that there are categories of nouns, such as the names of months or languages, that are considered proper names in some traditions and common nouns in others. Heraldry provides an interesting further comparison to traditional name categories, as the use of coats of arms fulfils most of the usual criteria suggested for properhood.

While heraldry is not a part of a linguistic system in the usual sense, there are strong similarities. Coats of arms have a structure that can be described in syntactic terms, and they have fragmentary semantic content that is very similar to that found in proper names. While at first glance these two systems for identification look widely different, the clear similarities between them make a strong case that something like properhood is very fundamental to the way humans see the world.

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Introduction

Properhood is one of the fundamental concepts in onomastics that has been debated on and off for centuries, as described e.g. by Nicolaisen (1995) and Coates (2006). Historically proper names have been considered a separate category of nouns, defined essentially by their being senseless. At the same time, there has been a dispute on whether proper names develop from appellative descriptions: while some onomasticians side with Leibiz (1710) in claiming that all proper names can be traced to such origins, others claim that proper names result from specific naming processes which make them separate. It is easy to find well-documented counterexamples to both these extremes.

Coates (2006) ends up with a position that properhood is not a structural category but should instead be considered pragmatic. Van Langendonck (2007) expands on this, but he too considers the central criterion to be that '[t]he meaning of the name, if any, does not (or not any longer) determine its denotation' (Van Langendonck 2007: 322). Figure 1 shows this in terms of the semiotic sign: properhood is defined by the existence of the arrow *a*, linking the form of the name directly to the referent, while common nouns require the route shown as arrow *b*, from form to meaning and only from there to the referent (Leino 2007: 53-54).

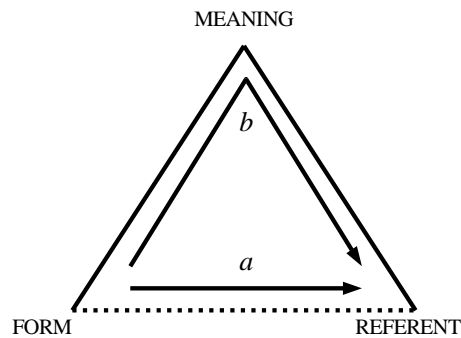


Fig. 1. Onomastic and linguistic meaning on the semiotic triangle

Using the tripolar formulation of a linguistic sign instead of the Saussurean bipolar one is useful in that it makes an explicit distinction between the onymic reference and semantic content (or meaning) while at the same time acknowledging the existence of both. The naming process can often involve an interplay between the two, in both the new name and prior names used as models, but as the primary function of proper names is to refer to the named individual, the semantic content is often fragmentary.

It is possible to see how this works while looking at a traditional core category of proper names, such as toponyms (Leino 2007). However, when trying to make sense of a phenomenon, it is often useful to look not only at typical examples, but also non-typical ones. In the field of linguistics, onomastics is itself at the fringe; but when looking at properhood a new point of view can be found by looking at non-linguistic sign systems used for identification. Heraldry¹ is one such system.

Names and Heraldry as Seen by the Public

Heraldry has been used to identify people, places and various corporate entities for centuries, although its origins are not well known. The most common explanation for having armorial insignia is their use in medieval warfare and tournaments, but it is evident that other cultural factors contributed (Bedingfield and Gwynn-Jones 1993). What is clear, though, is that the first coats of arms in the modern sense appeared in the first half of the 12th century, and by the end of the century, the systematic nature of heraldry had been established and arms were widely used by the high nobility all over Europe.

Some heraldists, especially in the English-speaking world, consider coats of arms as inherently tied to noble rank (see e.g. Gayre 1961). However, in continental Europe arms were soon adopted by commoners, and as far away from central Europe as in Scandinavia the oldest burgher seals with coats of arms date to the middle of the 13th century and become widespread in early 14th century (Wasling 2008: 16, 51). The social range of their use is not relevant here, though: what is important are the similarities between coats of arms and proper names.

¹ Some British scholars argue that the strictly correct term for the system and study of armorial insignia would be *armory*, as the term *heraldry* is also used in a wider sense to mean everything a herald works with. However, I am using *heraldry* in the narrower sense, since this is also a common English meaning of the word and since this is the way its cognates are used in other European languages.

The connection between proper names – in the case of people, primarily surnames – and coats of arms is old and widespread. The statutes of the Swedish House of Nobility, given in 1626,² protect the surname and coat of arms of a newly ennobled family in the same article:

Till thett Tiugw och Tridie: Ingen tage vpp annars Slächt Nampn, eller Wapn, hon ware Lefwandes eller Vthdödd, och Confundere i så motto Ätterne: Vtan den beholle tillnampned som dedh först hafwer Vptaget.

23. No-one may take the name or arms of another family, whether living or extinct, and thereby confuse families: but the one keep the surname who first took it.

In England, surnames and arms have been connected in that the Court of Chivalry used to have jurisdiction over both (Squibb 1959: 139). In Germany, a title of nobility, a surname and a coat of arms were all seen as property, to the extent that when the laws of inheriting surnames were changed, there was some discussion on whether the inheritance of arms should be changed similarly (Sunnqvist 2001: 89, 97-98, 134).

The similarities between names and arms are not limited to people. Various geographical entities, from towns to countries, have had armorial insignia – most notably, coats of arms and flags – since the dawn of heraldry, and these are used as clear signs of identity. As an example, most passport covers have both the name and coat of arms of the country in question. The connection between the two has occasionally been used consciously, so that for instance when the Finnish municipalities of Pälkäne and Luopioinen were merged in 2007 the new municipality adopted, as a compromise, the name of Pälkäne and the coat of arms of Luopioinen.

Structural Similarities

Proper names are widely different from each other. At one end there are expressions which are structurally identical to grammatical phrases but contextually recognisable as proper names, whose existence Coates (2006) uses as a part of his argument that properhood is pragmatic in nature. At the other extreme there are expressions that can only fit in the parent language as proper names, but which nevertheless may have some visible internal structure. A comprehensive linguistic theory should, in addition to being useful in describing the core parts of a language, be able to deal with all this variation.

Some schools of cognitive linguistics have explicitly stated as goals the ability to describe linguistic phenomena that are outside the core grammar. As Fried and Östman (2004) point out, language users know peripheral expressions, and do so without having been explicitly taught them; therefore, this knowledge must be in some way a central part of their knowledge of the language. Construction grammar is flexible enough to describe the structure of both toponyms (Leino 2007) and coats of arms (Leino 2008) with a similar enough notation that the two can be compared.

² Digitised original available at the Swedish national archives, <http://sok.riksarkivet.se/bildvisning/R0001944>

To illustrate how the notation of Construction Grammar can be adapted to place names, Figure 2 shows the structure of the lake name *Pieni Haukilampi* ‘Lesser Pike Pond’, including that of the hypothetical underlying toponym **Haukilampi* ‘Pike Pond’.³ Similarly, Figure 3 shows the structure of the coat of arms of Scotland using another variant of the same notation.

<i>Pieni Haukilampi</i>	
CAT	PN
SEM	‘Lesser Pike Pond’
<i>pieni</i>	<i>Haukilampi</i>
CAT	A
ROLE	modifier
SEM	‘small’
	<i>hauki</i>
	CAT N
	ROLE identifier
	SEM ‘pike’
	<i>lampi</i>
	CAT N
	ROLE classifier
	SEM ‘pond’

Fig. 2. The composition of a lake name using the notation of Construction Grammar

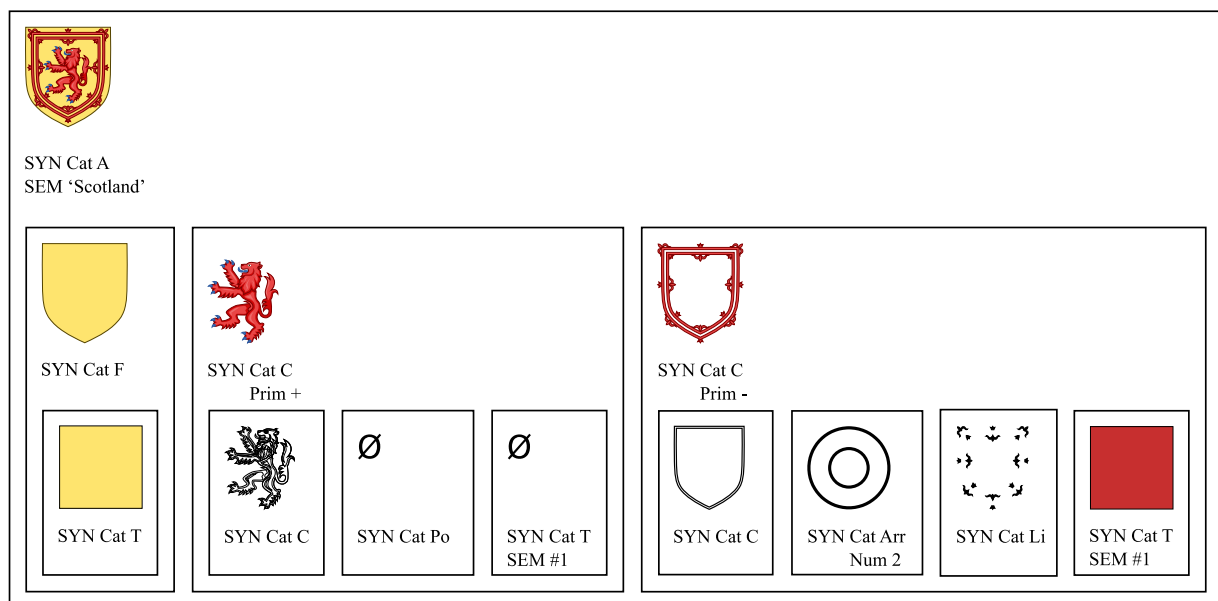


Fig. 3. The composition of a coat of arms using the notation of Construction Grammar (original image of the arms: Wikimedia Commons / Sodacan)

For both systems of identification there is also a corresponding system that normally lacks properhood. In the case of toponyms this is obvious, as place names are clearly used as a part of language. The case for heraldry is less clear, but in fact modern traffic signs conform to the traditions of heraldry to the extent that they can be described using the same ‘grammar’. Heraldic symbols can also be described completely unambiguously in a verbal form, and

³ There are some examples of *Pieni Haukilampi* being next to *Haukilampi*, but it is more common to have *Pieni Haukilampi* and *Iso Haukilampi* ‘Greater Pike Pond’ next to each other.

while the specific jargon did not develop parallel to the coats of arms themselves but instead emerged only about a century later (Brault 1997: 5-10), a verbal blazon is usually considered more trustworthy than a pictorial emblazon.

Similarities in Naming

The processes of coming up with a new name, or a new coat of arms, are varied. In some cases, the new toponym (such as *Mustalampi* ‘Black Pond’) can be a fairly direct description of a place; similarly, so-called canting arms involve a direct reference to the name (so that the 20th century Finnish heraldic artist Ahti Hammar had two hammers⁴ on his arms). However, it is relatively common that the new name has associations that link it not only to the properties of the named entity but also to existing names.

Figure 4 (Leino 2007:46) shows how a pre-existing lake name *Mustalampi* and the opposition of the lexical meanings of *musta* ‘black’ and *valkea* ‘white’ are used to give the neighbouring lake the name *Valkealampi*. The process itself is similar to the conceptual blending presented by Fauconnier and Turner (2003), although the notation is simplified.

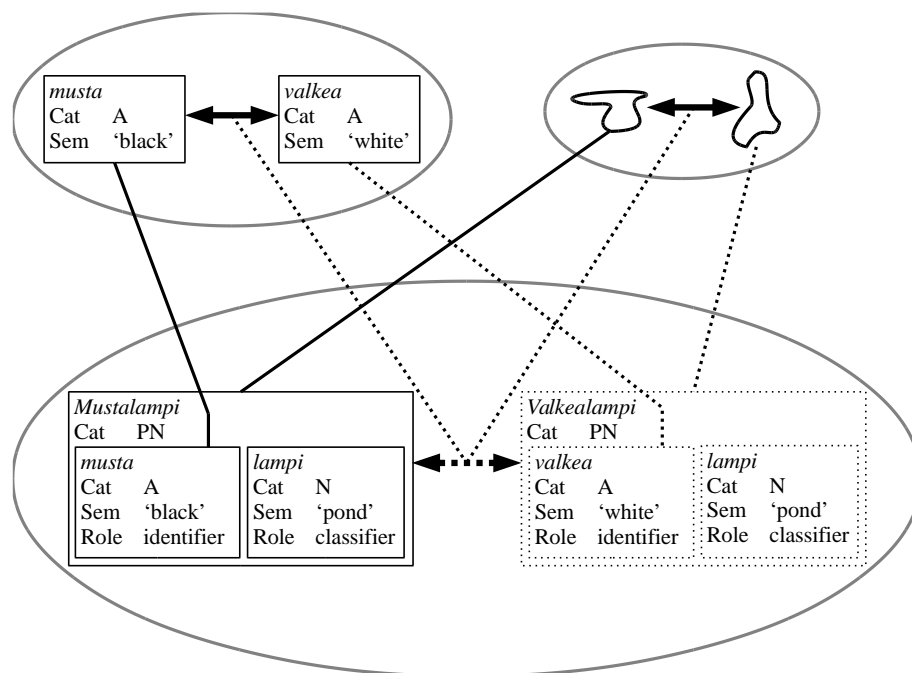


Fig. 4. Contrastive naming

Creating a new coat of arms can be described similarly. Figure 5 (Leino 2008) shows how the coat of arms of the Howard family was augmented after the battle of Flodden where King James IV of Scotland was killed by archers in the English army commanded by Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey. To commemorate this, the Howard arms were changed to include an escutcheon that has what looks like the arms of Scotland, except that there is only half a lion with an arrow through its throat.

⁴ In English, the shield would be blazoned as *sable, two hammers in saltire or*.

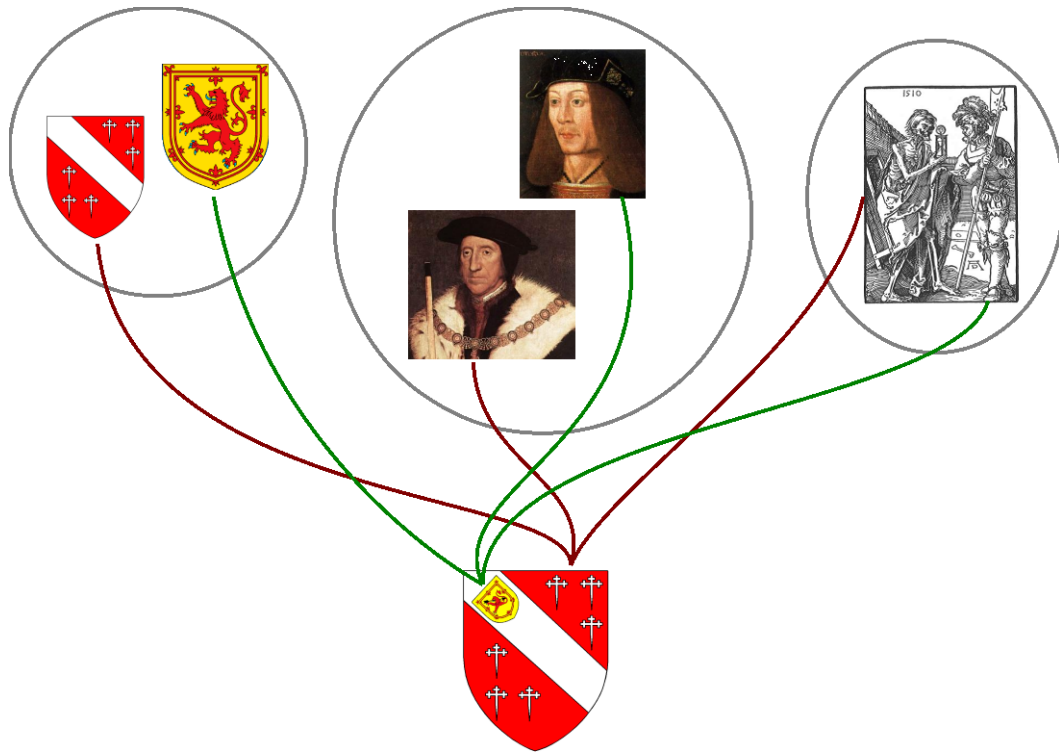


Fig. 5. Heraldic augmentation

Conclusions

Heraldry has several characteristics that resemble a name system. It is a system of symbols used for identification, with a clearly definable syntax-like structure to the symbols. It is also possible for these symbols to have semantic content, but neither the structure, nor the semantic content need to be complete and they both can dilute over time. Moreover, both the structure and the motivational origins of a coat of arms can be described using similar tools that have been successfully used to describe the corresponding onomastic phenomena.

Looking at these two systems in parallel, it seems that an onymic reference is somehow very fundamental, in that it can be coded similarly in a linguistic and an extra- or quasi-linguistic medium. In both these systems the naming process can involve a rich interplay between the onymic reference and the semantic content of the signs or their parts, in a way much more complex than the usually postulated process of an appellative expression becoming a proper name through semantic bleaching.

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